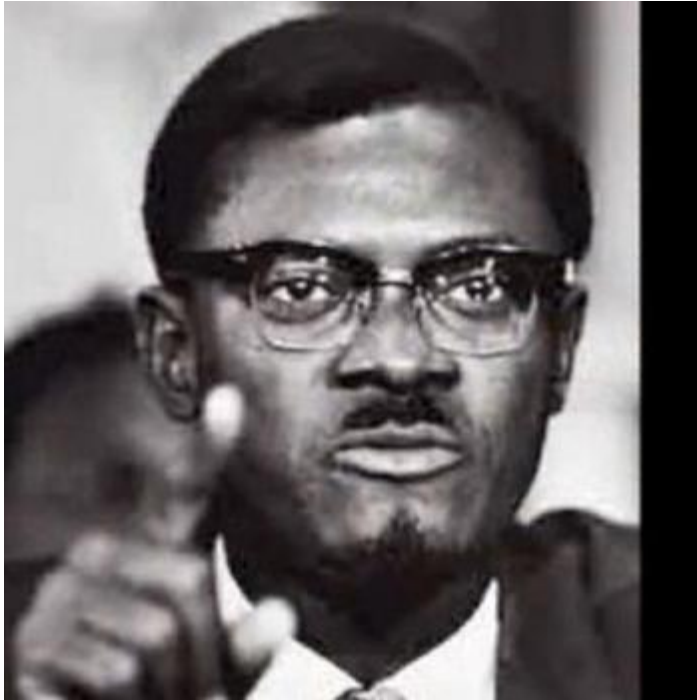


50 Years Ago: The Assassination of Patrice Lumumba

Posted by **Mike E** on January 17, 2011



Patrice Lumumba:

"This was our fate for 80 years of a colonial regime; our wounds are too fresh and too painful still for us to drive them from our memory.

"We have known harassing work, exacted in exchange for salaries which did not permit us to eat enough to drive away hunger, or to clothe ourselves, or to house ourselves decently, or to raise our children as creatures dear to us. We have known ironies, insults, blows that we endured morning, noon, and evening, because we are Negroes...."

Allen Dulles, Director of CIA, 1960 memo:

"In high quarters here, it is the clear-cut conclusion that if [Lumumba] continues to hold high office, the inevitable result will [have] disastrous consequences . . . for the interests of the free world generally.

Consequently, we conclude that his removal must be an urgent and prime objective."

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50 years ago today, on January 17, 1961, Patrice Lumumba was beaten, tortured and shot in the Congolese province of Katanga. He had been targeted for death by powerful enemies including the CIA, the Belgian government, mineral corporations plundering his country, and the gangs of hired mercenaries that sought to control Congo's working people.

The feelings of sorrow, loss and anger over this assassination and the loss of hope are still deeply felt in Africa — and among the many who remember.

This piece first appeared ten years ago, and has been re-edited for Kasama.

Patrice Lumumba: Rebellion and Murder in the Congo

by Mike Ely

July 30, 1960 was a hope-filled moment for many millions of people, in the worldwide struggle against colonialism. The Belgian colonialists, who had tormented and exploited the people of the “Belgian Congo” so intensely, had been forced to hand over the government of this vast and mineral-rich land. The Republic of the Congo was born, and one of its leaders was a fiery, young anti-colonial politician named Patrice Lumumba.

The Belgian King Baudouin I came to the ceremonies in Leopoldville, to personally declare the Congo independent. There was supposed to be mutual praise between the colonizers and the colonized—to cement a new relationship where little would change. The King in mindnumbing arrogance said:

“It is now up to you, gentlemen, to show that you are worthy of our confidence.”

Lumumba, the newly elected 35-year-old Prime Minister, walked to the microphone and brought the Congolese in the room to their feet. His moving and eloquent speech was broadcast over the radio to a waiting people. He spoke about their bitter lives under the Belgians, and about his hopes for the future. His coalition partners, the Belgian king was shaken.

Soon the crosshairs of a system's killers started to seek him out.



Lumumba said:

"This was our fate for 80 years of a colonial regime; our wounds are too fresh and too painful still for us to drive them from our memory. We have known harassing work, exacted in exchange for salaries which did not permit us to eat enough to drive away hunger, or to clothe ourselves, or to house ourselves decently, or to raise our children as creatures dear to us. We have known ironies, insults, blows that we endured morning, noon, and evening, because we are Negroes....

"We have seen our lands seized in the name of allegedly legal laws which in fact recognized only that might is right. We have seen that the law was not the same for a white and for a black, accommodating for the first, cruel and inhuman for the other.

"We have witnessed atrocious sufferings of those condemned for their political opinions or religious beliefs; exiled in their own country, their fate truly worse than death itself. We have seen that in the towns there were magnificent houses for the whites and crumbling shanties for the blacks, that a black was not admitted in the motion-picture houses, in the restaurants, in the stores of the Europeans; that a black traveled in the holds, at the feet of the whites in their luxury cabins. Who will ever forget the massacres where so many of our brothers perished, the cells into which those who refused to submit to a regime of oppression and exploitation were thrown?

"All that, my brothers, we have endured."

"But we, whom the vote of your elected representatives have given the right to direct our dear country, we who have suffered in our body and in our heart from colonial oppression, we tell you very loud, all that is henceforth ended. The Republic of the Congo has been proclaimed, and our country is now in the hands of its own children."

His words about the past were true. But Lumumba's words about the future were mistaken.



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In fact, their country was not yet in the hands of "its own children." Behind the façade of formal independence, Belgian military officers still controlled the Congo's army and police. The mineral corporations still had tight control over the wealth of the country and over an apparatus of corrupt politicians. Secret agents of the U.S. CIA, Belgian intelligence, and other powers were working day and night to keep power firmly and permanently in the hands of men loyal to imperialism.

Two hundred days after he took office, Patrice Lumumba was assassinated by imperialist agents.

This was a heart-rending moment for colonized and progressive people across the planet. It was an experience to teach millions of people much about the need for a peoples army and a revolutionary road to take them to victory—to national liberation and a new society.

Today, 40 years later, Africa's countries are independent, but its people still await genuine liberation. The Congo stands divided by warring forces, fueled and backed by rival imperialist powers.

Leopold's Preserve

The Congo River thunders out of central Africa into the Atlantic Ocean after traveling for thousands of miles in a great loop through rainforest and savannah and through the lands of 200 peoples.

In 1885, following 300 years of European slave trade along this coast, the Belgian King Leopold II took the great basin of the Congo River as his personal property. His claims were approved at the infamous Berlin Conference of 1885, where the European powers gave each other approval to exploit the peoples of Africa.

Leopold II seized for himself an African land as big as France, Germany, Britain, Spain and Italy combined. It was 80 times larger than Belgium, the small imperialist European country where he was king. Leopold named his preserve "The Free Congo" and created a network of armed outposts and slave labor camps.

How often that word "freedom" is twisted in perverse ways by capitalism and colonialism!

The brutalities against the Africans in these camps are among the most extreme and horrifying experiences recorded in history. Rubber, timber and palm oil poured out of the rainforest camps, enriching Belgian and U.S. capitalists, including Guggenheim, Morgan and Rockefeller. In 20 years, these murderous operations cut the population of the Congo from 25 million to 15 million.

In 1908, faced with revolts among the Congo people, the Belgian ruling class changed their form of rule over their most valuable colony: their government took over direct administration and renamed the land the "Belgian Congo."



Huge changes swept over this “Belgian Congo” during the following decades, as the colonists started to exploit rich copper fields in the Congo’s isolated, southern-most Katanga province and the diamond fields of Kasai. During World War 2 (1939-45) the Congo was the source of rubber and minerals crucial for the imperialist war efforts (including titanium and 65 percent of the world’s cobalt). When the U.S. dropped their atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the uranium they used came from the Shinkolobwe mine in the “Belgian Congo.”

Through these changes, a modern proletariat emerged in the Congo, alongside the millions of peasants who formed the majority of the nation. By 1941, wartime production had increased the working class to 500,000—the second largest concentration of proletarians in Africa. Over the following 15 years, the main city of Leopoldville (now called Kinshasa) increased ten times in size to 300,000.

A Storm of Struggle

World War 2 greatly weakened the world’s colonial system. Nazi Germany was cut off from its African colonies. Belgium and France were occupied by Germany. And Britain was deeply absorbed in fighting within Europe. And all these traditional colonial powers came out of the war diminished.

Meanwhile, the people of China, led by Mao Zedong and the Communist Party of China, carried through a historic anti-imperialist revolution—liberating their country from the Japanese, defeating the U.S.-backed KMT, and then stopping the U.S. itself in Korea. Never before had colonized people defeated imperialist forces in that way. A huge wave of anti-colonial struggle erupted around the world—driving out the colonialists in Vietnam, Algeria, Cuba and other countries.

In 1963, the Communist Party of China wrote:

"A great revolutionary storm has spread through Asia, Africa and Latin America since World War II. Independence has been proclaimed in more than 50 Asian and African countries... The imperialists are no longer able to extinguish the prairie fire of national liberation. Their old colonial system is fast disintegrating. Their rear has become a front of raging anti-imperialist struggles. Imperialist rule has been overthrown in some colonial and dependent countries, and in others it has suffered heavy blows and is tottering."

In the Congo, people organized militantly against Belgian rule—facing repression and extremely difficult conditions. All power was in the hands of Belgian settlers—who commanded all police and troops, staffed all the mining and government operations. With few exceptions, Congolese people were forbidden education above grade school. By the 1950s, only 100 Congolese people had received a college education. The Belgian imperialists worked steadily to apply the old methods of "divide and conquer"—promoting hostilities between peoples and regions. The developing independence movement in the Congo did not succeed in forming a revolutionary communist party. Instead most progressive forces gathered in 1958 within a semi-legal Pan-Africanist party, the Congolese National Movement (MNC) led by Patrice Lumumba. Lumumba was a young activist from the upriver region of Stanleyville (now called Kisangani). Before joining the MNC, he was involved in various independence movements and an organization of African government employees.

Handwriting on the Wall

When this radical MNC emerged—seeking to overcome tribal differences and fighting for a unified independent Congo—the colonial government responded harshly. Lumumba and many of his co-fighters spent time in Belgian prisons for sedition. At the same time, in 1959, the Belgian colonialists decided to grant formal independence quickly. They could see their old ways would not last—and, like the French colonialists in West Africa and the British in India, wanted to set up an "independent" government of their choosing before the mass movement grew beyond their control. They wanted the new Congolese government to be weak, headed by the most conservative pro-Belgian forces, and dependent on Belgian officials, military officers and funds.

It was a plan to replace colonialism with neo-colonialism—a fake independence which kept the real power and economic life firmly under foreign monopoly capitalist control. To carry out their plans, the imperialists of tiny Belgium relied

heavily on the backing of their ally, U.S. imperialism—which had emerged from World War 2 as the dominant imperialist power (and which had its own plans for the Congo).

The MNC strategy was to mobilize the people to force Belgium to make good on its promises for independence. The MNC intended to use elections organized by the Belgian colonialists to take control over the existing colonial apparatus, armed forces and police. Then, once in power, they planned to end Belgian dominance over the Congo—step by step. They believed they could then make the rich natural resources of the Congo serve its people, and take their place as equals among other nations.

The MNC hoped for a peaceful transition of power, and did not take steps to form their own armed forces that could take on the colonial army. In early 1960, Lumumba said, “Mistakes have been made in Africa in the past, but we are ready to work with the powers which have been in Africa to create a powerful new bloc. If this effort fails, it will be through the fault of the West.”

Fearing the growing strength of the MNC, the Belgian imperialists sped up their timetable for granting independence. In July 30, 1960, a new independent Congolese government took office. The MNC had gotten the most votes in the election, and Lumumba held the Number 2 spot as Prime Minister.

Deadly Neo-Colonial Intrigue

The imperialists quickly decided that any coalition government in the Congo that include Patrice Lumumba and the MNC was a danger to their interests. They mobilized all the forces at their disposal to create divisions and chaos, to isolate, paralyze and remove Lumumba. And they had many such forces. Lumumba had support among the masses of people—but the main apparatus of state power and the whole structure of finance and mining were all left over from colonial times. As Belgian bureaucrats left their offices, they took literally everything with them—files, records, even telephones—in a determined effort to sabotage the Lumumba government.

The renamed ANC (National Army of the Congo) was the same army created by the colonialists. Massive revolt broke out in the army—by black soldiers refusing to take abuse from their white officers and by the white officer corps refusing to take orders from the new national government.

Foreign covert operatives, especially the CIA, worked intensely to destabilize the country and recruit “assets” within the army and government. Among these was Joseph-Desiré Mobutu, a former sergeant in the colonial police who the new government put in command of ANC troops.

Meanwhile, the mining companies made sure that the state power in the valuable mineral regions remained in reliable hands. One month after Lumumba came to power in Leopoldville, they had their local puppet Moïse Tshombé declare that distant Katanga province was independent from the Congo. It is now documented that this secession was secretly supported by the Belgian government.

Taking advantage of this “destabilization,” the Belgian government flew more of its troops into the Congo—over the objections of Lumumba’s government. A wave of mass resistance broke out against this attempt to reimpose colonial authority. Faced with the combined threat of foreign invasion, civil war and government collapse, Lumumba had few organized forces to bring into the struggle. In desperation he reached out for one foreign force after another. First he requested UN troops—only to discover that they too answered to the imperialists (especially the U.S. imperialists) and not to his government. Then Lumumba turned to the Soviet Union—hoping to use them as a counterbalance to Western imperialist intrigues.



Patrice Lumumba

The Soviet Union was then still widely seen as an anti-imperialist and socialist power. However, huge changes had happened in the USSR. Capitalism had been restored there under Nikita Khrushchev — and this development was not widely recognized by revolutionaries at the time. The new Soviet ruling class was seeking their own neo-colonial relations with countries like the Congo. The Soviet revisionists argued that anti-imperialist revolution should not be attempted, saying it might trigger a nuclear world war between the U.S. and the USSR. Instead they urged colonial people to open up their countries to Soviet “advisers” and military agents, and develop economic production within a Soviet sphere of influence. In September 1960, plane loads of Soviet military advisers and agents arrived in the Congo. The U.S. ambassador started referring to the Prime Minister as “Lumumbavitch.”

All kinds of reactionary and imperialist forces were fighting to take over the Congo. Lumumba, who carried with him the hopes of the Congolese people, found himself more and more isolated and powerless.

The Order to Assassinate

"The players move swiftly and in secret. Each broad turn sweeps across rivers, forests, continents, and oceans, witnessed only by foreign glass eyes and once-mighty native trees cut away from their roots.... On a day late in August, 1960, a Mr. Allen Dulles, who was in charge of the CIA, sent a telegram to his Congolese station chief suggesting that he replace the Congolese government at his earliest convenience. The station chief, Mr. Lawrence Devlin, was instructed to take as bold an action as he could keep secret: a coup would be all right. There would be money forthcoming to pay soldiers for that purpose. But assassination might be less costly...."

Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*

"In high quarters here, it is the clear-cut conclusion that if [Lumumba] continues to hold high office, the inevitable result will [have] disastrous consequences . . . for the interests of the free world generally. Consequently, we conclude that his removal must be an urgent and prime objective."

Allen Dulles, Director of CIA, 1960 memo

"No brutality, mistreatment, or torture has ever forced me to ask for grace, for I prefer to die with my head high, my faith unshakable, and my confidence profound in the destiny of my country, rather than to live in submission and scorn of sacred principles. History will one day have its say, but it will not be the history that Brussels, Paris, Washington, or the United Nations will teach, but that which they will teach in the countries emancipated from colonialism and its puppets."

Patrice Lumumba's letter to his wife, Pauline Lumumba, January 1961, a week before his assassination



Frank Carlucci, the CIA agent sent to organize the assassination Lumumba.

Carlucci (center) later became Ronald Reagan's Secretary of Defense

At the end of September 1960, the U.S. CIA agent Colonel Mobutu staged a virtual

coup d'état suppressing political organizations in the capital. Shortly afterwards, on October 10, Lumumba was put under house arrest, imprisoned in his home by UN and ANC troops. Lumumba escaped on November 27 and tried to make it to his main base of mass support in Stanleyville.

On December 2, he was captured again by Mobutu's men on the banks of the Sankuru River. Under strict orders direct from New York not to intervene on Lumumba's behalf, UN troops watched as he was brutalized and driven away. Patrice Lumumba was flown first to Leopoldville and shown to gathered journalists and diplomats. And then, for the following month, the captive Lumumba was passed, hand to hand, from one group of his enemies to another, to be beaten and tortured. He was finally flown into Katanga and handed over to the secessionist forces there for execution.

Patrice Lumumba died in the chilly early morning of January 18, 1961, pierced by the bullets of a firing squad. His captors later said he had been courageous through all those horrors, and at the end faced his executioners defiantly.

CIA Lies

Initially, the U.S. and Belgian imperialists announced that Lumumba had been killed by "outraged villagers." In the decades that followed, they insisted that he had been executed by "his Congolese enemies." These lies were intended to back up the central racist and neocolonial justification of the assassins: the claim that the African people were (and are) "incapable" of ruling themselves.

In fact, the problems that overwhelmed the Lumumba government were the result of systematic "destabilization" carried out by imperialist forces.

In recent years, more details have surfaced about the joint U.S.-Belgian operation that carried out the final assassination. It is now known that U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower personally ordered the assassination of Patrice Lumumba during a White House national security meeting in August 1960, less than two months after Congo became independent. U.S. agents were unleashed to carry this out, among them Frank Carlucci, who later rose to become Ronald Reagan's Secretary of Defense.

On October 6, just days before Lumumba was put under house arrest, Count d'Aspremont Lynden, Belgian Minister for African Affairs, sent a cable to Katanga's capital calling for the "definitive elimination" of Patrice Lumumba.



Lumumba bound and brutalized

From the moment Lumumba was captured on December 2, he was under the control of imperialist agents. He was tortured in a villa guarded by Belgian troops. On January 15, 1961, the Belgian Minister for African Affairs personally wrote to the puppet Tshombe government in Katanga, saying that they must accept Lumumba immediately. Two days later it was done. Lumumba arrived in Katanga on a Belgian DC-4. Lumumba and two close supporters, Mpolo and Okito, were shot by an execution squad headed by a Belgian captain, while Katangese officials and various imperialist agents watched.

To cover the truth, a Belgian police team was sent to dig up Lumumba's body shortly after his execution, and dissolve it in acid (provided by the mining company officials). Their masters did not want to leave a single trace of this crime. But their coverup has failed. The world now knows who shot Lumumba and strangled the hopes of the Congo's people.

A Lesson Paid in Blood

"The United States has all along attempted to control the Congo. It has used the United Nations forces to perpetrate every kind of villainy there. It murdered the Congolese national hero Lumumba and subverted the lawful Congolese Government. It imposed the puppet Tshombe on the Congolese people and dispatched mercenary troops to suppress the Congolese national-liberation movement.... The purpose of U.S. imperialism is not only to control the Congo, but also once again to enmesh the whole of Africa— particularly the newly independent African countries—this time in the coils of U.S. neo-colonialism."

Mao Zedong, ***Statement Supporting the People of the Congo (L.) Against U.S. Aggression***, Nov. 28, 1964



Patrice Lumumba 02.07.1925 - 18.01.1961

The last images of Patrice Lumumba

Lumumba was 35 when he died. He had only been in office a few months. Sadness and outrage swept millions of people around the world. Several different forces tried to take up arms in the Congo against the neo-colonial forces. But under the difficult conditions they faced after Lumumba's death, none of them successfully made a transition to a protracted revolutionary armed struggle. UN troops and white mercenaries worked together with Mobutu's U.S.-trained ANC to suppress the resistance.

Moïse Tshombé soon headed a new pro-imperialist government, only to be replaced by General Mobuto, who ruled (and robbed) the country mercilessly for decades. While the imperialists have worked ceaselessly to keep the rich mineral wealth of the Congo in their hands, their intrigues and infighting have left that country, once again, ruined and divided by war.

Today, as the challenges of revolution and national liberation face so many people and movements, the days of Patrice Lumumba stand as a vivid lesson about the ruthless nature of imperialism and neo-colonialism.

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- 5.